

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 5, 2008

SAN DIEGO RIVER TRIBUTARY CANYONS PROJECT

File No. 08-059

Project Manager: Megan Johnson

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse an amount not to exceed \$150,000 to the San Diego River Conservancy to plan public access improvements and natural resource enhancements in tributary canyons of the lower San Diego River in the City of San Diego.

LOCATION: Lower Mission Valley, City of San Diego, San Diego County (Exhibit 1).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Project Components](#)

Exhibit 2: [San Diego River Conservancy Resolution, May 15, 2008](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31111 and 31400 *et seq* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed \$150,000 (one hundred fifty thousand dollars) to the San Diego River Conservancy (SDRC) to develop a plan for public access improvements along the lower San Diego River and its tributary canyons. This authorization is subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of any funds, the SDRC shall submit for the review and written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, budget, schedule, and the names of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the work.”

Staff further recommends that the Coastal Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the current Project Selection Criteria.

2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding public access to the coast.
 3. The San Diego River Conservancy has approved this project for funding.
 4. The proposed project serves greater than local needs.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed authorization will provide up to \$150,000 to the San Diego River Conservancy (SDRC) to plan public access improvements in canyons that drain to the San Diego River in the City of San Diego. The San Diego Canyons Plan will balance public access improvements with environmental stewardship, restoration, public safety and interpretative elements. This project will develop a conceptual plan, which will include: schematic construction designs; initial assessment of environmental impacts archaeological significance and other regulatory concerns; construction cost estimates; and a project funding and implementation strategy.

The plan will identify improvements to the existing trail system in addition to new trail segments, including a connection from Ruffin Canyon north of the River to Mission Valley, and from Mission Valley south to Normal Heights Canyon. The plan will help determine a route up the steep southern escarpment in the Normal Heights Canyon. Design plans will identify alternative alignments throughout the project area, and a “wayfinding” information and interpretive scheme will be conceptually designed to demarcate the “urban trail” which will connect the upland communities to the canyons and pocket parks, trolley stations, and a proposed footbridge crossing the River.

The plan will include a conceptual design of a footbridge at the center of the project area in Mission Valley. The footbridge will cross the San Diego River adjacent to the Fenton Parkway MTS station, near the Mission Valley Public Library and a new regional shopping center (see Exhibit 1). Though in a distinctly urban setting, this river reach contains a lush narrow band of willow with a canopy of mature riparian trees that’s home to breeding least Bell’s vireo, a federal and state-listed endangered migratory bird. Public access improvements here would accompany work already planned by the SDRC to control invasive plants. The footbridge design must consider river flood flows and the integrity of the riparian habitat, while capturing the imagination.

The study area includes a recently-constructed trolley station and the City’s Chargers football stadium. The stadium area, located just upstream, is the subject of numerous re-development schemes, including a 20-40-acre community park, a prominent feature of both the approved Mission Valley Community Plan and the San Diego River Park Master Plan. The proposed footbridge and associated access ways will complement the larger urban design effort at this site.

Once implemented, the project would provide for a system of trails connecting upland communities to and across the San Diego River, with enhanced habitat areas throughout the trail system. Today non-vehicular access to the San Diego River from surrounding upland communities consists of a few renegade trails and informal public footpaths that are often hazardous and erosion-prone. The link to the river and its trail system will provide upland communities with safe hiking access to the river park, nearby urban attractions and a Metropolitan Transportation System (MTS) trolley line and protect the surround landscape from

erosion and depredation. Bike access improvements will be planned as well. Along the river, projects are being developed independently to provide multi-purpose trail connections to Ocean Beach and the California Coastal Trail, some six miles to the west.

Site Description: The project area includes canyons north and south of the San Diego River, a central reach of the river itself and the connecting neighborhoods of Mission Valley, Serra Mesa, Normal Heights and North Park in the heart of the city (Exhibit 1). To the north lies the Ruffin Canyon complex, the largest tributary canyon natural area in this reach of the river. The Ruffin Canyon complex is estimated at two square miles and includes Sandrock Canyon and some 125 acres owned and managed by the City Recreation and Parks Department, Open Space Division. To the south, across Interstate 8, lies the Normal Heights Canyon, characterized by steep chaparral-covered ravines and a patchwork of public and private ownerships.

Project History: Over the past year, the Coastal Conservancy has supported SDRC staff members in working with the City of San Diego and community interest groups to develop the proposed project. Some 3,200 acres of canyon environment is owned and managed by the City's Department of Parks and Recreation, Open Space Division. An open space network formed by parks, canyons, river valleys, habitats, beaches, and ocean is embraced as a guiding principle in the city's vision for its future and is supported in policy in the City's recently updated General Plan. This SDRC project will help bring this "urban greening" vision into focus and at the same time contribute to the San Diego River Park and other long-term Conservancy coastal access interests.

Numerous grassroots groups have formed to care for neighborhood canyons and advocate for better habitat, water quality and public trails. To date, some thirty-nine canyon "friends" groups have been united through the Sierra Club's San Diego Canyons Campaign and ten canyons have been adopted for monthly cleanups by the group "I Love a Clean San Diego". The proposed project is the first of several expected to be brought forward over the next several years to address the dual challenges for public access and environmental quality required in realizing the City's vision for its canyon open space areas.

On May 15, 2008 the board of the SDRC approved a resolution to complete the San Diego Canyons Plan. (see Exhibit 2)

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$150,000
<u>SDRC (in-kind)</u>	<u>\$11,500</u>
TOTAL	\$161,500

Staff expects to use funds appropriated to the Conservancy in fiscal year 2007-08 from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84) for projects approved by the San Diego River Conservancy. This funding source may be used for the protection of San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds. Proposition 84 allows for the utilization of funds for expenditures pursuant to Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, as specified in Section 75060(b). Pursuant to Section 75060(b), funds may be allocated to the improvement of accessways so long as compliant with Division 21 of the Public Resource Code. This project shall apply such funds to the improvement of accessways.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 (Sections 31400-31405) of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Consistent with Chapter 9, Section 31400 states that the Conservancy shall have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. The proposed action will enable the Conservancy to play a primary role in developing public trails that will connect inland communities to the nearby Ocean Beach and the California Coastal Trail. Section 31400.1 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies to develop, operate, or manage lands for public access purposes to and along the coast. Consistent with this section, the proposed grant would assist with developing trails that will connect to a network of coastal trails. Consistent with § 31400.2, staff has evaluated the amount of funding provided to the SDRC in light of the total amount of available for coastal public accessway and urban waterfront projects, the fiscal resources of the grantee, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects, and the application of factors prescribed by the Conservancy for the purpose of determining project eligibility and priority (see discussion below).

Section 31111 authorizes the Conservancy to fund and undertake plans and feasibility studies and to award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for these purposes. The proposed project is consistent with the authority given in this section.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2007
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective E** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed authorization would design regional trails along rivers and creeks to connect inland populations to the coast and expand recreational opportunities.

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective G**, the proposed authorization would assist to secure real property or property interests to facilitate development of inland connecting trails to the California Coastal Trail.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on September 20, 2007, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The project enjoys the support of the state and local public officials and community groups represented on the San Diego River Conservancy board. (Exhibit 2).

The San Diego River Coalition, an alliance of 60 community groups working on the River, has identified the proposed project on its 2008-2009 Work Plan.

4. **Location:** The project is located on a lower reach of the San Diego River in Mission Valley and nearby tributaries just inland of the coastal zone. The project will undertake the planning necessary to establish a network of trails connecting upland communities to the San Diego River Trail and Coastal Trail. Once constructed, this trail system will provide non-motorized access to San Diego's most popular beach communities.
5. **Need:** Coastal Conservancy action is needed to provide the San Diego River Conservancy with funding earmarked in the Conservancy's FY 07-08 Prop 84 budget appropriation for projects approved by the SDRC.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The trail system that is to be planned will connect upland communities and Mission Valley with the coast and also serve Mission Valley's hotels and conference centers. The project is key to providing access and interpretive information for visitors and residents of the region alike.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** Momentum exists now in San Diego to better manage the natural resources of its canyons and to provide better access to them. It's an ideal time to collaborate with others to achieve Coastal Conservancy enhancement and access objectives.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project will set into motion planning to achieve public access and public education objectives. The proposed work should assist in balancing needs related to habitat enhancement with concerns for fire safety by identifying a vegetation management scheme that addresses both.
9. **Innovation:** The project will include the design of a footbridge over the San Diego River that respects the presence of breeding least Bell's vireo and its critical habitat requirements and at the same time celebrates the river with an important crossing needed to achieve non-vehicular circulation.
10. **Readiness:** The San Diego River Conservancy and its nonprofit partners are prepared to undertake and complete the project in a timely manner.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See "Project History" above.
15. **Cooperation:** The project is possible because public and private interests, including the principle landowners, have an interest in engaging in the work now.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

This project is not located within the coastal zone. However, the proposed project will provide trails which will lead to coastal trails. The Coastal Act specifically addresses public access. Public Resources Code Section 30210 mandates that:

“In carrying out the requirements of Section 4 of Article X of the California Constitution, maximum access, which shall be conspicuously posted, and recreational opportunities shall be provided for all the people consistent with the public safety needs and the need to protect public rights, rights of private property owners and natural resource areas from over use.”

The trails planned under this project will increase the ability of pedestrians to reach coastal trails and other coastal amenities in the lower San Diego River areas. The City of San Diego Local Coastal Plan calls for maximum feasible public access to the coastal areas through use of coordinated linkages between pedestrian street crossings, pedestrian bridges, and an improved bikeway system.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA: The proposed project is statutorily exempt from the provisions of CEQA under 14 California Code of Regulations, Section 15262 exempting feasibility studies for possible future actions that the Conservancy has not approved, adopted or funded and do not require preparation of an EIR or negative declaration. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the proposed authorization.